

Jamie Willix

Professor Lux

College Writing

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Hills Like White Elephants

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a masterful short story that explores the complexities of communication and the emotional struggles of a couple as they navigate a life-changing decision. Hemingway explores cultural differences, varying societal expectations, as well as relationship intricacies throughout the story. The setting in the story is a powerful element that Hemingway uses to create a sense of atmosphere and mood for the story and audience. Additionally, the symbolism used in the story, particularly with the phrase "white elephants" and the landscape surrounding the characters creates a strong visualization of what Hemingway is trying to convey about the couple's grappling relationship and future decision. Furthermore, the role of absinthe in the story also carries great significance in the context of the characters' relationship throughout the story, along with their interactions and dialogue. In "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway uses the elements of symbolism, setting, and dialogue to reveal the complexities of a couple grappling with an unplanned pregnancy and to shed light on the importance of understanding and empathy, while also commenting on cultural and societal differences.

Hemingway uses the setting to convey the cultural and societal differences between the American man and his girlfriend. As one critique, David Grant notes, the story takes place in a train station in Spain, a location that represents the American expatriate experience in Europe (Grant 14). The couple's dialogue reveals that they are traveling from Barcelona to Madrid,

which further emphasizes their displacement and disorientation in a foreign country. As Grant observes, "The man's insistent talk about the familiar and comforting aspects of American life contrasts with the alien environment of the train station, underscoring the couple's dislocation and inability to communicate" (14). Meanwhile, the scholars, Edward Week and Lewis Week add insight that the surrounding landscape, described as "long and white" with "no shade and no trees," symbolizes the couple's barren and desolate relationship (Weeks 29). The bleak and featureless landscape reinforces the sense of isolation and hopelessness that pervades the story. Furthermore, the scholar, Doris Lanier argues that the consumption of absinthe, a drink associated with the bohemian and artistic culture of Europe, underscores the couple's status as outsiders and their attempt to escape from their problems (Lanier 235). The greenish hue of the absinthe is also suggestive of the impending decision that the couple must make regarding the pregnancy. By using the setting to highlight the couple's cultural and societal differences, Hemingway sets the stage for the tension and conflict that will unfold throughout the story.

In addition to the theme of communication, Hemingway also explores the themes of identity and power in relationships through the use of dialogue and symbolism in "Hills Like White Elephants." The couple's conversation is marked by a lack of direct communication, with both parties avoiding explicitly stating their desires and needs. This creates a sense of tension and unease in the dialogue, which Grant notes reflects the broader theme of the "inability of Americans in Europe to communicate with one another effectively" (Grant 16). The sparse and often awkward dialogue between the man and the woman also highlights the lack of understanding and empathy between them. As Weeks note, "The dialogue is at once naturalistic and stilted, emphasizing the characters' difficulties in communicating with one another" (Weeks 166). For example, when the man says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," she

responds by changing the subject and suggesting that they order another drink. The girl's response indicates that she is avoiding discussing the operation further and is perhaps trying to distract herself from the difficult decision they are facing, yet neither one of them state clearly or directly what they think. The couple's dialogue is characterized by a power dynamic in which the American man tries to convince his girlfriend to have an abortion without directly asking her. This dynamic is also reflected in the imagery of the train tracks, which symbolize the diverging paths that the couple could take. As Weeks observe, "The train tracks suggest the man's need for control, as he sees the abortion as a way to keep the relationship on track, so to speak" (Weeks 32). The way in which he talks down to her and dismisses her concerns reveals this need for dominance over their situation. For example, when the woman expresses her apprehension about the operation, the man responds with a dismissive "It's just to let the air in" (Hemingway 212), completely disregarding her concerns and feelings. The man's insistence on the abortion and his attempts to persuade his girlfriend to have it indicate a desire for control over their relationship and his girlfriend's body. In contrast, the woman's reluctance to have the abortion and her desire to keep the baby suggest a desire for agency and independence in her life. She resists the man's attempts to persuade her, demonstrating a strength of character that is often overlooked in interpretations of the story. As Lanier notes, "The woman's quiet insistence that 'we can have everything' reveals that she understands the magnitude of the decision, and that she will not be coerced or manipulated by her partner" (Lanier 43). Thus, the tension and conflict between the couple ultimately stem from their inability to communicate their desires and needs effectively, and the power dynamic between them that reflects broader societal power structures.

Furthermore, Hemingway expertly weaves symbolism into the narrative to heighten the tension and complexity of the story. For instance the symbolism of the landscape, as the couple

waits for their train, with the barren white hills loom in the background, represents the unknown and potentially dangerous journey that lies ahead; as noted by Grant who writes, "The hills are a symbol of the perilous journey that the couple is about to embark on, a journey filled with uncertainty and fear" (Grant 16). The use of descriptive words about the landscape are also very implicative. As Hemingway wrote, "The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun" (Hemingway). This image conveys a sense of emptiness and desolation, as well as the couple's isolation and vulnerability in the face of their decision. In addition, the title of the story itself is symbolic of the couple's dilemma. The phrase "white elephant" traditionally refers to a beautiful and rare, yet burdensome gift. In this sense, the title suggests that the baby represents both a burden and a rare opportunity for the couple; it reflects how the decision the couple faces is a rare and valuable opportunity to change their lives, but it is also a burden and a difficult decision. Edward Week and Lewis Week observe that "the white elephant symbolizes the ambiguity and complexity of the woman's feelings toward the baby, and her recognition of it as a 'white elephant' reveals the intricacy of her emotional state" (Weeks 31). In addition, the hills also serve as a symbol of the couple's relationship, with the gap between them being as vast as the distance between the hills. The hills are described as "long and white" and "looking like white elephants," indicating that they are both beautiful and burdensome, just like the couple's relationship. Thus, the symbolism of the landscape and title serves to enhance the themes of communication, power, and identity that are at the heart of the story, and emphasize the larger societal issues that underlie the couple's conflict.

The use of absinthe in "Hills Like White Elephants" is also significant, as it reinforces the themes of power and control that are present in the story. Absinthe, a highly potent alcoholic

beverage that was banned in many countries due to its reputation for causing hallucinations and erratic behavior, serves as a powerful metaphor for the unknown and potentially dangerous path that the couple is about to take. The man's insistence on drinking absinthe despite the woman's apprehension highlights his need for control over their situation and relationship. As Lanier notes, "the man's decision to order absinthe despite the woman's clear apprehension about it reinforces his dominance and control over their situation and relationship" (Lanier 153).

Moreover, the consumption of absinthe can be seen as a symbol of the bitterness and toxicity of their relationship and decision. Just as absinthe is known for its bitter taste and potential toxicity, the couple's decision to have the operation and their relationship in general is fraught with bitterness and potential danger. The drink serves as a potent reminder of the risks they are taking and the uncertain future that lies ahead. In conclusion, Hemingway's use of absinthe in "Hills Like White Elephants" is a powerful symbol that reinforces the themes of power, control, and potential danger that are present throughout the story. The drink serves as a potent reminder of the risks the couple is taking and the uncertain future that lies ahead. Through his use of absinthe, Hemingway underscores the importance of power dynamics and the potentially destructive consequences of making life-altering decisions.

In conclusion, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a rich and complex short story that explores themes of communication breakdown, power dynamics, and the bittersweet taste of change. Through the use of symbolism, imagery, and dialogue, Hemingway expertly conveys the uncertainty and ambiguity that pervades the story. The use of the setting, specifically the hills and the train station, serves to underscore the central conflict between the couple and the choices they must make. Hemingway's depiction of the couple's relationship is characterized by a power dynamic in which the man seeks control and the woman struggles to

assert her agency. This dynamic is exemplified through the use of dialogue, which reveals the couple's lack of understanding and empathy for each other. Ultimately, the story's ending remains ambiguous and unresolved, leaving the reader to ponder the couple's fate and the broader implications of their choices. "Hills Like White Elephants" is a testament to Hemingway's skill as a writer and his ability to capture the complexities and uncertainties of the human experience through the use of symbolism, dialogue, and setting.

Works Cited

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